The Mystery of the Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

(Continued From Last Sunday.)

"I have not been in the Yellow Room," he continued, "but I take it for granted that you have satisfied yourselves that he could have left the room only by way of the door; it is by the door, then, that the murderer made his way out. At what time? At the moment when it was most easy for him to do so; at the moment when it became most explainable—so completely explainable that there can be no other explanation. Let us go over the moments which followed after the crime had been committed. There was the first moment, when Monsieur Stangerson and Daddy Jacques were close to the door, ready to bar the way. There was the second moment, during which Daddy Jacques was absent and Monsieur Stangerson was left alone before the door. There was a third moment, when Monsieur Stangerson was joined by the concierge. There was a fourth moment, during which Monsieur Stangerson, the concierge and his wife and Daddy Jacques were before the door. There was a fifth moment, during which the door was burst open and the Yellow Room entered. The moment at which the flight is explainable is the very moment when there was the least number of persons before the door. There was one moment when there was but one person—Monsieur Stangerson. Unless a complicity of silence on the part of Daddy Jacques is admitted—in which I do not believe—the door was opened in the presence of Monsieur Stangerson alone and the man escaped.

"Here we must admit that Monsieur Stangerson had powerful reasons for not arresting or not causing the arrest of the murderer, since he allowed him to reach the window in the vestibule and closed it after him!—That done, Mademoiselle Stangerson, though horribly wounded, had still strength enough, and no doubt in obedience to the entreaties of her father, to refasten the door of her chamber, with both the bolt and the lock, before sinking on the floor. We do not know who committed the crime; we do not know of what wretch Monsieur and Mademoiselle Stangerson are the victims, but there is no doubt that they both know! The secret must be a terrible one, for the father had not hesitated to leave his daughter to die behind the door which she had shut upon herself—terrible for him to have allowed the assassin to escape. For there is no other way in the world to explain the murderer's flight from the Yellow Room!"

The silence which followed this dramatic and lucid explanation was appalling. We all of us felt grieved for the illustrious professor, so driven into a corner by the pitiless logic of Frederic Larsan, so forced to confess the whole truth of his martyrdom or to keep silent, and thus make a yet more terrible admission. The man himself, a veritable statue of sorrow, raised his hand with a gesture so solemn that we bowed our heads to it as before something sacred. He then pronounced these words, in a voice so loud that it seemed to exhaust him:

"I swear by the head of my suffering child that I never for an instant left the door of her chamber after hearing her cries for help; that that door was not opened while I was alone in the laboratory; and that, finally, when we entered the Yellow Room, my three domestics and I, the murderer was no longer there! I swear I do not know the murderer!"

Must I say it—in spite of the solemnity of Monsieur Stangerson's words, we did not believe in his denial? Frederic Larsan had shown us the truth and it was not so easily given up.

Monsieur de Marquet announced that the conversation was at an end, and as we were about to leave the laboratory, Joseph Rouletabille approached Monsieur Stangerson, took him by the hand with the greatest respect, and I heard him say:

"I believe you, monsieur."

I here close the citation which I have thought it my duty to make from Monsieur Maleine's narrative. I need not tell the reader that all that passed in the laboratory was immediately and faithfully reported to me by Rouletabille.

CHAPTER XII.

Frederic Larsan's Cane.

It was not till 6 o'clock that I left the chateau, taking with me the article hastily written by my friend in the little sitting-room which Monsieur Robert Darzac had placed at our disposal. The reporter was to sleep at the chateau, taking advantage of the inexplicable hospitality offered him by Monsieur Robert Darzac, to whom Monsieur Stangerson, in that sad time, left the care of all his domestic affairs. Nevertheless he insisted on accompanying me to the station at Epinay. In crossing the park, he said to me:

"Frederic is really very clever and has not belied his reputation. Do you know how he came to find Daddy Jacques's boots?—Near the spot where we noticed the traces of the neat boots and the disappearance of the rough ones, there was a square hole, freshly made in the moist ground, where a stone had evidently been removed. Larsan searched for that stone without finding it, and at once imagined that it had been used by the murderer with which to sink the boots in the lake. Fred's calculation was an excellent one, as the success of his search proves. That escaped me; but my mind was turned in another direction by the large number of false indications of his track which the murderer left, and by the measure of the black foot-marks corresponding with that of Daddy Jacques's boots, which I had established without his suspecting it, on the floor of the Yellow Room. All which was a proof, in my eyes, that the murderer had sought to turn suspicion on to the old servant. Up to that point Larsan and I are in accord; but no further. It is going to be a terrible matter; for I tell you he is working on wrong lines, and I—I, must fight him with nothing!"

I was surprised at the profoundly grave accent with which my young friend pronounced the last words.

He repeated:

"Yes—terrible!—terrible! For it is fighting with nothing, when you have only an idea to fight with."

At that moment we passed by the back of the chateau. Night had come. A window on the first floor was partly open. A feeble light came from it, as well as some sounds which drew our attention. We approached until we had reached the side of a door that was situated just under the window. Rouletabille, in a low tone, made me understand, that this was the window of Mademoiselle Stangerson's chamber. The sounds which had attracted our attention ceased, then were renewed for a moment, and then we heard stifled sobs. We were only able to catch these words, which reached us distinctly: "My poor Robert!"—Rouletabille whispered in my ear:

"If we only knew what was being said in that chamber my inquiry would soon be finished."

He looked about him. The darkness of the evening enveloped us; we could not see much beyond the narrow path bordered by trees, which ran behind the chateau. The sobs had ceased.

"If we can't hear we may at least try to see," said Rouletabille.

And, making a sign to me to deaden the sound of my steps, he led me across the path to the trunk of a tall beech tree, the white bole of which was visible in the darkness. This tree grew exactly in front of the window in which we were so much interested, its lower branches being on a level with the first floor of the chateau. From the height of those branches one might certainly see what was passing in Mademoiselle Stangerson's chamber. Evidently that was what Rouletabille thought, for, enjoining me to remain hidden, he clasped the trunk with his vigorous arms and climbed up. I soon lost sight of him amid the branches, and then followed a deep silence.

In front of me, the open window remained lighted, and I saw no shadow move across it. I listened, and presently from above me these words reached my ears:

"After you!"

"After you, pray!"

Somebody was overheard, speaking—exchanging courtesies. What was my astonishment to see on the slippery column of the tree two human forms appear and quietly slip down to the ground. Rouletabille had mounted alone, and had returned with another.

"Good evening, Monsieur Sinclair!"

It was Frederic Larsan. The detective had already occupied the post of observation when my young friend had thought to reach it alone. Neither noticed my astonishment. I explained that to myself by the fact that they must have been witnesses of some tender and despairing scene between Mademoiselle Stangerson, lying in her bed, and Monsieur Darzac on his knees by her pillow. I guessed that each had drawn different conclusions from what they had seen. It was easy to see that the scene had strongly impressed Rouletabille in favor of Monsieur Robert Darzac; while, to Larsan, it showed nothing but consummate hypocrisy, acted with finished art by Mademoiselle Stangerson's fiance.

As we reached the park gate Larsan stopped us.

"My cane!" he cried. "I left it near the tree."

He left us, saying he would rejoin us presently.

"Have you noticed Frederic Larsan's cane?" asked the young reporter, as soon as we were alone. "It is quite a new one, which I have never seen him use before. He seems to take great care of it—it never leaves him. One would think he was afraid it might fall into the hands of strangers. I never saw it before to-day. Where did he find it? It isn't natural that a man who had never before used a walking stick should, the day after the Glandier crime, never move a step without one. On the day of our arrival at the chateau, as soon as he saw us, he put his watch in his pocket and picked up his cane from the ground—a proceeding to which I was perhaps wrong to attach some importance."

We were now out of the park. Rouletabille had dropped into silence. His thoughts were certainly still occupied with Frederic Larsan's new cane. I had proof of that when, as we came near to Epinay, he said:

"Frederic Larsan arrived at the Glandier before me; he began his inquiry before me; he has had time to find out things about which I know nothing. Where did he find that cane?" Then he added: "It is probable that his suspicion—more than that, his reasoning—has led him to lay his hand on something tangible. Has this cane anything to do with it? Where the deuce could he have found it?"

As I had to wait twenty minutes for the train at Epinay, we entered a cabaret. Almost immediately the door opened and Frederic Larsan made his appearance, brandishing his famous cane.

"I found it!" he said laughingly.

The three of us seated ourselves at a table. Rouletabille never took his eyes off the cane; he was so absorbed that he did not notice a sign Larsan made to a railway employe, a young man with a chin decorated by a tiny blond and ill-kept beard. On the sign he rose, paid for his drink, bowed, and went out. I should not myself have attached any importance to the circumstance, if it had not been recalled to my mind, some months later, by the reappearance of the man with the beard at one of the most tragic moments of this case. I then learned that the youth was one of Larsan's assistants and had been charged by him to watch the going and coming of travelers at the station of Epinay-sur-Orge. Larsan neglected nothing in any case on which he was engaged.

I turned my eyes again on Rouletabille.

"Ah!—Monsieur Fred!" he said, "when did you begin to use a walking stick? I have always seen you walking with your hands in your pockets!"

"It is a present," replied the detective.

"Recent?" insisted Rouletabille.

"No, it was given to me in London."

"Ah, yes, I remember—you have just come from London. May I look at it?"

"Oh!—certainly!"

Fred passed the cane to Rouletabille. It was a large yellow bamboo with a crutch handle and ornamented with a gold ring.

Rouletabille, after examining it minutely, returned it to Larsan, with a bantering expression on his face, saying:

"You were given a French cane in London!"

"Possibly," said Fred, imperturbably.

"Read the mark there, in tiny letters: Cassette, 6a, Opera."

"Cannot English people buy canes in Paris?"

When Rouletabille had seen me into the train, he said:

"You'll remember the address?"

"Yes—Cassette, 6a, Opera. Rely on me; you shall have word to-morrow morning."

That evening, on reaching Paris, I saw Monsieur Cassette, dealer in walking sticks and umbrellas, and wrote to my friend:

"A man unmistakably answering to the description of Monsieur Robert Darzac—same height, slightly stooping, putty-colored overcoat, bowler hat—purchased a cane similar to the one in which we are interested, on the evening of the crime, about 8 o'clock. Monsieur Cassette had not sold another such cane during the last two years. Fred's cane is new. It is quite clear that it's the same cane. Fred did not buy it, since he was in London. Like you, I think that he found it somewhere near Monsieur Robert Darzac. But if, as you suppose, the murderer was in the Yellow Room for five, or even six hours, and the crime was not committed until towards midnight, the purchase of this cane proves an incontestable alibi for Darzac."

CHAPTER XIII.

"The Presbytery Has Lost Nothing of Its Charm, Nor the Garden Its Brightness."

A week after the occurrence of the events I have just recounted—on the 2d of November, to be exact—I received at my home in Paris the following telegraphic message: "Come to the Glandier by the earliest train. Bring revolvers. Friendly greetings. Rouletabille."

I have already said, I think, that at that period, being a young barrister with but few briefs, I frequented the Palais de Justice rather for the purpose of familiarizing myself with my professional duties than for the defense of the widow and orphan. I could, therefore, feel no surprise at Rouletabille disposing of my time. Moreover, he knew how keenly interested I was in his journalistic adventures in general, and, above all, in the murder at the Glandier. I had not heard from him for a week, nor of the progress made with that mysterious case, except by the innumerable paragraphs in the newspapers and by the very brief notes of Rouletabille in the "Epoque." Those notes had divulged the fact that traces of human blood had been found on the mutton-bone, as well as fresh traces of the blood of Mademoiselle Stangerson—the old stains belonged to other crimes, probably dating years back.

It may be easily imagined that the crime engaged the attention of the press throughout the world. No crime known had more absorbed the minds of people. It appeared to me, however, that the judicial inquiry was making but very little progress; and I should have been very glad, if, on the receipt of my friend's invitation to rejoin him at the Glandier, the dispatch had not contained the words, "Bring revolvers."

That puzzled me greatly. Rouletabille telegraphing for revolvers meant that there might be occasion to use them. Now, I confess it without shame, I am not a hero. But here was a friend, evidently in danger, calling on me to go to his aid. I did not hesitate long; and after assuring myself that the only revolver I possessed was properly loaded, I hurried towards the Orleans station. On the way I remembered that Rouletabille had asked for two revolvers; I therefore entered a gunsmith's shop and bought an excellent weapon for my friend.

I had hoped to find him at the station at Epinay; but he was not there. However, a cab was waiting for me, and I was soon at the Glandier. Nobody was at the gate, and it was only on the threshold of the chateau that I met the young man. He saluted me with a friendly gesture and threw his arms about me, inquiring warmly as to the state of my health.

When we were in the little sitting-room of which I have spoken, Rouletabille made me sit down.

"It's going badly," he said.

"What's going badly?" I asked.

"Everything."

He came nearer to me and whispered:

"Frederic Larsan is working with might and main against Darzac."

This did not astonish me. I had seen the poor show Mademoiselle Stangerson's fiance had made at the time of the examination of the footprints. However, I immediately asked:

"What about that cane?"

"It is still in the hands of Frederic Larsan. He never lets go of it."

"But doesn't it prove the alibi for Monsieur Darzac?"

"Not at all. Gently questioned by me, Darzac denied having, on that evening, or on any other, purchased a cane at Cassette's. However," said Rouletabille, "I'll not swear to anything; Monsieur Darzac has such strange fits of silence that one does not know exactly what to think of what he says."

"To Frederic Larsan this cane must mean a piece of very damaging evidence. But in what way? The time when it was bought shows it could not have been in the murderer's possession."

"The time doesn't worry Larsan. He is not obliged to adopt my theory, which assumes that the murderer got into the Yellow Room between 5 and 6 o'clock. But there's nothing to prevent him assuming that the murderer got in between 10 and 11 o'clock at night? At that hour Monsieur and Mademoiselle Stangerson, assisted by Daddy Jacques, were engaged in making an interesting chemical experiment in the part of the laboratory taken up by the furnaces. Larsan says, unlikely as that may seem, that the murderer may have slipped behind them. He has already got the examining magistrate to listen to him. When one looks closely into it, the reasoning is absurd, seeing that the 'intimate'—if there is one—must have known that the professor would shortly leave the pavilion, and that the 'friend' had only to put off operating till after the professor's departure. Why should he have risked crossing the laboratory while the professor was in it? And then, when he had got into the Yellow Room?—

"There are many points to be cleared up before Larsan's theory can be admitted. I sha'n't waste my time over it, for my theory won't allow me to occupy myself with mere imagination. Only, as I am obliged for the moment to keep silent, and Larsan sometimes talks, he may finish by coming out openly against Monsieur Darzac—if I'm not there," added the young reporter proudly. "For there are surface evidences against Darzac, much more convincing than the cane, which remains incomprehensible to me, all the more so as Larsan does not in the least hesitate to let Darzac see him with it!—I understand many things in Larsan's theory, but I can't make anything of that cane."

"Is he still at the chateau?"

"Yes; he hardly ever quits it!—He sleeps there, as I do, at the request of Monsieur Stangerson, who has done for him what Monsieur Robert Darzac has done for me. In spite of the accusation made by Larsan that Monsieur Stangerson knows who the murderer is he yet affords him every facility for arriving at the truth—just as Darzac is doing for me."

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)